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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001050

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/05/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: THE MANY FACES OF TURKISH SECULARISM

REF: ANKARA 1043

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson, for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Differing interpretations of secularism in Turkey cloud public discussion of a concept central to the closure case against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the struggle to modernize Turkish society. Traditional "secular" elites focus on state authority -- over religion and many other matters -- while AKP's definition focuses on the irreligious state protection of the individual conscience. The public on the whole appreciates Turkey's secular nature as the legacy of founding father Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and regards it as largely separate from personal religiosity. State sanctioned Ataturk-worship is, in some ultra-secularist quarters, as fundamentalist and absolute as an extreme version of religion, and theirs is as much as struggle about power as ideology. The fact that these issues are now under public discussion is one silver lining of Turkey's recent, polarized political battle. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Most Turks would probably define secularism as separation of state and religion, but their notion of the concept is fundamentally different from American secularism. In Turkey, "secularism" refers to direct state control of religious institutions (sometimes referred to as laicism), rather than separation of state from religion. Ataturk created the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), attached to the Prime Ministry, as the state institution overseeing religion, responsible for building mosques, centrally writing and distributing Friday sermons, and paying the salaries of all imams, who are civil servants. While the term "secular" is often casually applied to individuals to signal their lack of public piety, it more accurately refers to their acceptance of state control of religion. Most secular Turks still look to Islam for life-cycle events, such as circumcision ceremonies or funerals, and may fast or abstain from alcohol, if only during Ramadan.

13. (SBU) Also at play is the discrepancy between the state as guarantor of public order versus guarantor of individual freedoms. The Constitution's preamble orients Turkey toward unity of the nation, which, on the whole, takes precedence over the individual; rights derive from the grace of the state and can be suspended at the state's discretion. The preamble brooks "no interference whatsoever by sacred religious feelings in state affairs and politics," and notes that citizens may "develop their spiritual assets under the aegis of national culture." In this context, freedom of religion is not an unlimited right in Turkey. To the extent

it is respected, it is respected more for majority Sunni Muslims than for Alevis, to say nothing of Christians, Jews, etc., who often run afoul of public and bureaucratic antipathy and political indifference.

14. (SBU) Secularism's differing definitions play out very visibly in the AKP closure case. The chief prosecutor's indictment argues for an understanding of secularism:

- Religion should not be effective or dominant in state affairs;
- Individuals should be granted unlimited freedom in their spiritual life, without discrimination, and religions should be put under constitutional guarantee;
- Limitations should be introduced to protect public order and security, and misuse and exploitation of religion should be banned;
- The authority of the state, as the protector of public order and rights, to exercise control over religious rights and freedoms should be recognized.

15. (SBU) Incantations of secularism by AKP leaders, including PM Erdogan and President Gul, are no less frequent than those by the Kemalist state, but they mean something different. In contrast to the Chief Prosecutor's language about secularism, the AKP's response observes that "secularism" consists of two parts: (1) state systems cannot be based on religious rules; and (2) the state assures freedom of religion and conscience

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for individuals. The state is the protector of individual liberties. In his recent address to the European Parliament Foreign Relations Committee, Foreign Minister Ali Babacan defined secularism as the clear separation of state and religious affairs, adding the state should not interfere with individuals who want to meet the requirements of their religion. Those with different beliefs, including atheists, should be able to enjoy such freedom, he said. Even within AKP, the state's prominence in people's minds remains evident; Vahit Erdem privately described secularism to us as the "freedom of the state from religion."

16. (C) Complicating the "secularism" debate is Turkey's post-revolutionary hero-worship of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, a mindset instilled from every citizen's earliest days. Children memorize and recite his sayings, and educators are legally bound to mold young minds in accordance with Ataturk's principles. Enormous portraits drape public buildings on official holidays and stare down from every office and shop; every town orients itself around an "Ataturk Avenue." Confirming the near-hagiarchy, the Constitution's preamble describes Ataturk as the "immortal leader and unrivaled hero." His words are literally and ubiquitously engraved in stone throughout the country. Questioning his legacy or even attempting to locate it in an historical context is discouraged in the extreme, both officially and socially. A law makes insulting him punishable by jail time, and a university professor here who suggested that Ataturk might be "regressive in some respects" was literally hounded out of the country late last year. While nearly all Turks profess unequivocal love for Ataturk, for most the specifics are vague and sit comfortably with other beliefs. For a powerful minority able to shape the debate, however, religious piety looms as a threat to the orienting principles of Ataturk.

17. (C) The harder core of the "Kemalist" elite -- relatively more educated and better able to articulate Ataturk's principles, including that the Republic's integrity hinges on its secular character -- takes a more rigid line that incorporates extreme, quasi-religious characteristics. Kemalists act as police for their version of the secular state: socially, through the media, and by virtue of official

positions in the bureaucracy and judiciary. For them, Ataturk's word is law; it cannot be questioned, amended, or adapted to new circumstances -- to do so is to commit a kind of heresy close to treason. Kemalist rigidity extends beyond bureaucratic centers -- which resent losing ground to a rising class of more socially or religiously conservative Anatolians -- to include a broader class of society who genuinely fear losing their way of life, including the freedom to dress as they choose, drink alcohol or smoke. The desire and sense of duty to protect these freedoms leads to an impulse to criticize or even squash visible piety in others. So-called neighborhood pressure to conform to Islam has its counterpart in Kemalism.

18. (C) Turkey's Ataturk cult in some ways has kept the country in a state of prolonged adolescence in which the world is understood in black-and-white, and reactions to new developments are more emotional than rational. The clumsy discussions today about the nature of Turkey's secularism and its competing models -- which probably could not have occurred 10 or 15 years ago -- may signal movement away from this stasis. AKP's individual-oriented definition of secularism is in tension with Diyanet guidelines for "proper" individual conduct (reftel). Such mixed signals amplify fears that AKP is practicing Islamic "takiyye", or dissembling, to achieve an alleged secret agenda of imposing Islamic order, and make constructive discussion of secularism almost impossible. Similarly, many "secularists," compromised by rigid conformity and the "people serve the state" mentality, undermine their own argument that the secular state can best protect individual freedom. Hardening on both extremes is gradually coloring the rest of Turkish society, long proud of tolerance and flexibility. If Turks hash out a definition of secularism a majority can live with, that may be the silver lining of the current polarized political battle.

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